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Interview with Kevin Clark

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Professor Kevin Clark

INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN CLARK

Poet & Professor of English

Kevin Clark is a Professor of English, a poet, and a pretty good baseball player. His poetry has appeared in many magazines and collections. The Academy of American Poets awarded his full-length collection, *In the Evening of No Warning*, a publisher's grant from the Greenwall Fund. He has published poems in *The Georgia Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *College English*, *The Antioch Review*, and other national journals. In 2002 he received Cal Poly's Distinguished Teaching Award.

Matt Novak: When did you first discover that you had the Muse of poetry hovering about your head? That is, when did you first realize that you had the talent and insight to become a nationally-publishing poet?

KC: When I was a kid I loved to write and tell stories. In fact, my father wrote for a living. He'd been an English major at Notre Dame and was a journalist for a while before settling into public relations. Every night at dinner, he and my mother encouraged my brothers and me to entertain them with the stories of our school day. But there was a catch: We couldn't be boring. So I'd tell them about the weirdest thing that happened that day. Or I'd outright make stuff up. As long as the family was smiling I knew I had a good gig going.

My father was a great story teller, of course, with a great laugh, and our whole extended family of aunts and uncles could hold a room with marginally true stories. Looking back, I realize now that I always loved the sounds of their words. And even before I was a teenager I also loved the sound of rock and roll. Especially the beat. So these insistent rhythms found their way into the language of my own essays and poems and stories at school. Sometimes my teachers would read my stuff out loud to the class. Now that was inspirational.

But I didn't know for sure that I had what it takes to get to the level I think you mean, until after I'd gone to college at the University of Florida where the poetry writing profs liked my stuff a lot and encouraged me and told me I oughtta go to grad school. Even then I didn't feel especially confident. When I went to UC Davis for my MFA in creative writing, my work, as rough as it was, was treated seriously by these big poets like Karl Shapiro and Sandra Gilbert and Ruth Stone and Thom Gunn...

Then one day during grad school I opened my mail box and I received an acceptance from *The Georgia Review*, a big time lit mag. That's when I figured, okay, I really can do this...

MN: Is there a place for a muse in modern culture, or has the notion of muse been supplanted to some degree by the prevalence of technology, particularly communication technologies, in the modern day?

KC: Well, poetry itself has long been usurped by other media. Literate folks often read and recited poetry right through the nineteenth century. Presidents read poetry. Lincoln and his wife read poems to one another at night. As you know, Tennyson's work sold well. Then along came technology: radio and tv and picture magazines and then mass travel and video games and the Web. And, since the turn of the 20th century, poetry gradually became less important to folks. Though there had been a small resurgence lately...

But your question is truly interesting to me in another way, Matt. I think the very subject of this interview, the Muse, is actually up for question nowadays. But not simply because of technology, which can certainly be used to enhance art. Centuries ago, folks believed that a creature called the Muse existed. Science has made some of us, and I include myself here, more materialist in our philosophical outlook. I do believe in inspiration, but I don't believe that there is some ethereal being shooting arrows of creativity across the veil into my soul.

When I was talking about inspiration to a Buddhist friend of mine who is a poet and writer of creative non-fiction, I told him that I didn't believe in some exterior force who leads us to our best work. He said, "So you don't believe in God either?" I told him I don't believe in an anthropomorphic deity, that I doubted there was a Judeo-Christian god who dispenses existence, justice, mercy and creativity.

I think the Muse is a metaphor for that particularly expansive, fluidic state of the imagination when it gets on a good roll.

MN: So if there is no exterior force who leads writers to their best work, then are you suggesting that inspiration is enhanced by craft?

KC: Yes, "enhanced" is a good word, though people usually think of craft as a boring, step-by-step learned skill. When it comes to art, craft is something else. I think of myself becoming inspired by finding ways into a kind of free flowing, mesmeric state. In *The World According to Garp*, John Irving has a good line about this transformation: "What Garp was savoring was the beginning of a writer's long-sought trance, wherein the world falls under one embracing tone of voice." I suppose I have different methods of getting to that trance, and therein is the most important craft. Most of the time, I go to the blank page or the keyboard and begin typing. Sometimes I play with the sound of a line. Sometimes I take somebody else's line and reverse the meaning of every word and then go from there into the associative unknown, whatever that may be. Most of the time I have an image or a narrative in mind but no words for it yet. Then, after I have

written a few lines, if I'm lucky, I find myself responding in an almost hypnotic manner; distractions fall away. Metaphorically, something in me "crosses over." This change—or trance—is fired by the imagination, of course, but I do think it has physical attributes. I feel it. I like the word "inspired," because for me the word suggests the nexus of imagination and sensation.

MN: Tell us how you, as a professional poet, go about the creative act. Do you rise at 5:00 a.m., go into your lonely writer's garret, drink a pot of coffee, and ponder deeply the state of the universe before you put ink to paper? Or is it a somewhat more—you'll pardon the word—prosaic endeavor?

KC: There is the good schedule and then there is the more common frenzy. And then, off in the distance, there is the idyllic situation.

During summers, I usually get up with my wife and kids, work out maybe three times a week, then get to my study by 10:30 in the morning or so. I write on and off till 4 p.m.. I'll get phone calls and lunch and there's plenty of family business, but I'm pretty productive. Last summer I wrote a number of new poems and drafted a couple of essays. I don't know yet if the poems will be any good, but I'm always hopeful.

During the school year, I try to do the same, but as you know, Matt, in the csu there are many many demands on our time, some of which are pointless. Right now, for instance, our department is forced to undergo assessment review, and with the help of other faculty I'm writing a report on the creative writing program. The assessment movement is not merely useless; it's counterproductive. But that argument's for another time. Because retired tenured professors have not been replaced, our department is spread thin as cellophane. We've dropped from thirty-six tenure track faculty to twenty-one. Anyway, we hope to hire two new professors and so prospects are visiting and we go to all of their presentations and lunches and receptions, as we should. Last quarter you and I were writing reports on candidates for retention and tenure. Service can seem endless. Some of the work is actually important. All of it distracts from writing and teaching.

Given these distractions, I like your word "prosaic." I have no time for writer's block, believe me. My goal is to do something every weekday—and as many weekend days as possible—that advances my writing life. I don't always succeed, but I'm dedicated to squeezing the writing into the openings in my schedule. I must say that you, old friend, as department scheduler, have helped me profoundly by granting me all afternoon classes.


There are occasional days of creative bliss, though. Sometimes, often in summer, my wife and I get to go away for a few days to a friend's cabin on the north coast, and I write daily for four or five hours and do some deep reading. I don't ever drink caffeine; it

interferes with getting into that trance I described. But yes I do ponder up there. I read poetry and novels and books on physics or whatever, and then my wife and I go for walks. Up there I've had some of my most productive, "inspired" moments and written some of my best poems.

MN: You spoke earlier of being in a trance-like state, but as a poet, do you ever actually know when you've been visited by your muse and somehow transcended the world of the merely human? I'm thinking here of Sir Philip Sidney's suggestion in his Apology for Poetry that flowers can smell sweeter in a poem that they do in a garden, that is, that the poet can create a "reality" that is—to put it crudely—more "real" than nature has created. I'm asking this question naively, but is that what it means to be visited by the Muse: to be in touch with the essence of "nature" itself?

KC: Great question. Let's assume the visiting muse is what I've been calling the trance. Some might think that to be conscious of the trance is to negate the trance. But that doesn't seem to be the case for me. I often know when I'm there. I know I'm not displaced. Athletes often call it "being in the zone." They don't want to analyze it, but they know when they're in it. Anyway, it's a great drug-free rush, a terrific habit to cultivate. I don't believe it's any more "real" than any other state. But I do think it's a most productive addiction.

I don't want to disappoint folks who see nature in Emersonian terms, but I'm dubious about nature actually having a magical, transcendent "essence." That said, I do think the "flowers" of my poem can seem irresistibly enthralling while I'm writing that poem. Returning to the poem the next day, it may be that the flowers had been old and stale all along and they need pruning and replanting in the revision process. (Al Landwehr often says that the feeling you get when you're writing well is equal to that feeling you have when you're reading the best novel you've ever read. As a codicil, he adds that, unfortunately, the next day it turns out your writing isn't quite up to that novel...) So I try to immerse myself once again in "the zone" and get back to the work of making them alluring. To that extent, Sydney seems metaphorically correct to me: While I'm on a writing roll, my imagination is heightened in such a way as to bring my faculties in close touch with the world of my subjects and images.

Ultimately, I want the finished poem to be a conduit. I want to be able to come back to the poem weeks or months later and find that it takes me back to the trance. If it can get me close to the distinct pleasure I had when writing the poem, if it can put me in touch with the Muse I'd known in the act of its creation, then I think that the poem is ready for the world to see... 

Interview conducted by Matt Novak, Professor of English and Director of the Technical Communication Program.



Self-Portrait by Ruben Diaz

INTERVIEW WITH RUBEN DIAZ

Photographer & Art and Design Student

Ruben is a student in Art and Design with a concentration in photography. He was born and raised in Oxnard, California. His short academic career involves attending CSNU, Moorpark College, and Cal Poly. His father, who indirectly influenced him, always had a camera around. He does not really consider himself a photographer, but an experimenter of the photographic process. After Cal Poly, he is interested in attending Graduate School in Los Angeles. The rest of his life, he feels, will be closely related to the fine arts and exhibiting work.

Heidi Wilkinson: What kind of creative work do you participate in?

RD: At this moment, I mostly experiment with photography. From a technical perspective, I use color photography and I also work with night photography. I would like to work in groups with creative productions. For the last small bit of time that I have, I work with sound and films. Sometimes, I will record sounds, or film different scenarios, and then connect the images to the sounds. When playing with sound, working with a few creative people is essential.

HW: Where do you think your inspiration comes from?

RD: I look back to where I came from, Oxnard, California. The area is quickly developing environmentally, which is slowly erasing my deepest memories. When I grew up there, vast fields and huge power lines covered the landscape. You could see the mountains in the horizon from the flat farmlands. People know Oxnard for its long rows of strawberries, but the objects around these landscapes are what interest me. For example, rusty farm equipment and run down fences silhouette and bask in the sunset's blanket. In the way many people might see these things as old or dirty, I only see beauty.

HW: Do you think nature was a big influence?

RD: Not in the sense of the images portrayed by *National Geographic Magazine* but more in the sense of how Mother Nature can be random and incohesive; it's interesting what nature leaves behind when you really look at it. I try to experiment and add this randomness to all of my art and use whatever I can get my hands on.

HW: Is there a connection for you between the traditional muses and the 21st century arts?

RD: Definitely. There is a connection. But for me, the Muse is recognizing the inspiration falling in my lap. I don't really go out searching or calling for inspiration; I see it

in everyday objects. These inspirational moments won't always spark artistic endeavor, but they do stay with me. It is like I fill drawers full of "art information" and open them when a project arises.

HW: Many of the liberal arts (art, music, dance, and theatre) would traditionally require a muse. Now, they are barely taught, much less popular modes of artistic expression. Do you think people find the Muse important today?

RD: In this society, artistic expression is second to earning a living. People are more worried about getting a job than self expression. Money is what everyone wants, but for me, artistic endeavors guide my life. Sadly, people don't get a chance to find themselves artistically because of economics. More and more art programs are being cut in elementary schools, and that is only adding to the problem. The Muse is still important today, but the audience is dim.

HW: Do you think the entertainment industry is the only place for artists to thrive and express their inspirations?

RD: No. The industry provides a quick way to make people understand what you want to say because it controls everything. But there are other ways. If we didn't have TVs or radios, people could connect and express themselves within communities. People could share artistic interests by creating a web of relationships, a sort of rolodex full of creative people. Sometimes, on the other hand, people have to use this huge industry to catapult their ideas while they can.

HW: Where do you think people should go for inspiration?

RD: It's really simple: people should go into their own minds. I want to find my own direction of interest. I don't want someone to tell me where to go, what to watch, what to listen to. And, often times, I learn and get inspired more from people who are not necessarily teachers. For example, I am inspired by Barbara Morningstar, the coordinator for the Cal Poly University Art Gallery, and the way she deals with students. When we interact with each other, it feels more like a friendship than an actual instructor or manager. Once people get comfortable, they can learn from each other.

Another inspiring person is my mentor, Ben Helprin. Any time that I have needed help, he has been there to guide or give me suggestions. Ben gives confidence to young artists, which sometimes is dangerous because there is nothing to stop the inspiration. ⑤

Interview conducted by Heidi Wilkinson, who teaches writing courses in the English Department and writes poetry.

Self-Portrait by Ruben Diaz.